



Photos by Joshua Fitzwater

A FRUITFUL JOURNEY

My watermelon summer

BY DEBRA FREEMAN

I ASKED THE HARDWARE STORE clerk if he had wolf urine in stock.

“What did you just say?” he asked with a puzzled look.

I cleared my throat and repeated my request. The clerk threw his head back and laughed until tears wet his eyes.

I tried to explain that I wanted to deter deer from eating the watermelons that my boyfriend, Fitz, and I were growing. How Fitz stumbled across this tidbit on the Internet, I have no idea. The clerk said, “Ma’am, I’ve worked here for thirty years and no one has ever asked me for wolf urine. I can’t wait to get home and tell everybody about this.”

I returned to my car, leaned back in my seat, closed my eyes, and thought about the rabbit hole that led me to enter a store and ask for canine excrement with a straight face. I blame the Bradford watermelon.

Almost two years ago, I read about the Bradford watermelon in a magazine. Nathaniel Bradford cultivated the melon on his farm near Sumter, South Carolina, in the 1850s. Prized for its sweetness, the Bradford fell out of commercial production because its delicate rind makes shipping impossible. I was instantly intrigued. Could this melon really taste so different from the mass-produced, grocery store variety? I had to find out. Nathaniel Bradford’s descendant and namesake, Nat Bradford, grows Bradford watermelons today. I went to his website and paid twenty dollars to reserve a melon. When it ripened in late August, Fitz and I would drive to Sumter to pick it up—a 670-mile round trip from our

Clockwise from top left: Ancient Crookneck watermelon seeds; the author with a Congo watermelon in Delaware; Ancient Crookneck watermelon; the author’s boyfriend, Joshua “Fitz” Fitzwater, growing watermelons in Fredericksburg, VA.

home in Richmond, Virginia.

That summer, Fitz and I started tracking down other heirloom watermelons. I’m not entirely sure why either of us became so attached to finding watermelons. We enjoy doing things out of the ordinary, and it was even better that it was food related.

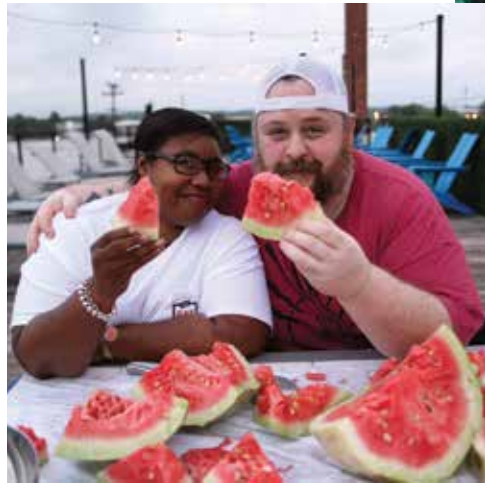
On Saturday mornings, we would get up at 5 A.M. and hit the road. In the car, we’d jostle between Fitz’s preferred metal-guitar-and-scream-singing soundtrack and my more melodious r&b and pop choices. We’d finally settle on ‘80s radio—thank goodness for Phil Collins.

Once we’d get to a farmers’ market,

When the melon ripened in late August, Fitz and I would drive to Sumter to pick it up—a 670-mile round trip from our home in Richmond, Virginia.

we’d needle anyone with watermelons. We’d knock on the fruits to hear a hollow sound—an indicator of sweetness—and look for the discolored “foot” on the bottom of the melon, a sure sign of ripeness. Fitz and I would tag-team farmers with questions about variety, flesh color, and provenance. If the answers were satisfactory, we’d buy a few melons and place them in a rolling cooler.

Our drives took us to farms and farmers’ markets up and down the East Coast, and we tried as many as we could find: Ali Babas, Missouri Heirlooms, Yeni Dunyas, Crimson Sweets, Ancient Crooknecks, Odell’s Whites, Royal Goldens, Moon and Stars. As soon as we got back to our hotel room, we’d cut them open



THIS PAGE, clockwise from top left: Bradford watermelons in Sumter, SC; Freeman in PA; Freeman and Fitzwater enjoy an Odell's White; OPPOSITE, clockwise from top left: Freeman holds a Moon and Stars; Brad Constable farms Odell's White and Early Moonbeam watermelons near Farmville, VA; Buckle up, Bradford!



Eventually we filled the refrigerator shelves so full of watermelons that there wasn't room for a gallon of milk.

and take photos from almost every angle. Fitz would take a seed out and study its color and shape to determine whether or not he was going to save it. I don't think either of us knew what he was looking for—it came down to a gut feeling. We'd scoop a hunk of flesh out of the heart and taste it, seeing if it was juicy and firm, assessing whether it was picked at the right time.

On a muggy weekday afternoon in Norfolk, we cut open a yellow-fleshed Moon and Stars on a park bench and were stunned that it tasted like an apricot. Another day, following a morning rain shower, we grabbed a knife and some paper towels and ate an Ali Baba on the

rooftop of our apartment. After driving through Amish country in Pennsylvania, we brought back a watermelon of unknown type. When we placed it on the kitchen counter, it began to hiss as the flesh seeped out of the rind. We threw it in the trash immediately.

We began to talk about harvesting seeds. We searched online for the elusive Orangeglo and found the closest grower was in Louisiana. We haven't made it there—yet. Abstract ideas became tangible as seeds overtook our kitchen. They soaked in cups of water beside the sink. They waited in airtight containers that lined the counter. Eventually we filled the refrigerator shelves so full of

watermelons that there wasn't room for a gallon of milk.

Watermelon season ended, but our quest did not. After a long winter spent poring over seed catalogs, our conversations turned to trying to grow them ourselves. This was not an easy feat since we live in the middle of the city, without arable land. A friend knew members of the Patowomeck Tribe, who allowed us to farm on a small section of their land in Fredericksburg, Virginia, an hour north of us. We planted Ancient Crook-neck melons—one of the same varieties Native Americans grew centuries ago—in indigenous soil.

We harvested seeds from Odell's

White, a watermelon attributed to an African American seedsman named Harry in South Carolina, who was possibly enslaved by pomologist William Summer. The melon got its name from Milton Odell, a South Carolina grower in the 1840s.

ONCE WE TASTED what he developed—sweet, but not overbearingly so, with crisp flesh—we decided to share those seeds with African American farmers such as Chip Powell, who was delighted to learn the history of the Odell's White watermelon and to plant them in his fields.

Fitz set out to begin the process of



Hopefully, by year three, we will produce a melon that will be uniquely Virginian.

Clockwise from top left: A ripe Odell's White; Freeman's daughter with an Ancient Crookneck-Moon and Stars hybrid; heirloom watermelon hot sauce; Brad Constable and his son at Crumptown Farms

Clockwise from top left: Freeman holds Odell's White seeds; Fitz holds a Moon and Stars; smoked Ancient Crookneck

creating an original melon by cross-pollinating the Ali Baba with the Ancient Crookneck to create the Double A Sweet, a watermelon that would combine the firm texture of the Ancient Crookneck with the sweetness of the Ali Baba. Creating a new watermelon takes approximately three years for the traits to fully develop. This year, the seeds were brown, a mix of the red seeds of the Ancient Crookneck and the black seeds of the Ali Baba. The melon flesh was a pinkish hue and it was extremely juicy, as evidenced by the stains on our shirts, with a medium level of sweetness. Next year, we will see

if any of these traits carry over, or if any new characteristics appear. Hopefully, by year three, we will produce a melon that will be uniquely Virginian.

By the end of the summer, we successfully grew nearly 100 watermelons and put them into the hands of chefs who made a myriad of dishes like watermelon chow chow, smoked watermelon barbecue sandwiches, and watermelon jam. With chef Forrest Warren of Smoke in Newport News, we created a vinegar-based watermelon barbecue sauce. And with Floyd Thomas of Redwood Smoke Shack in Norfolk, we blended a

hot sauce of Scotch bonnet peppers, watermelon, and lime. Both sold out quickly thanks to Facebook, and we'll offer them again next year.

What started as a weekend hobby morphed into an obsession. We've introduced melons to Virginia soil and invited people to taste the past.

At the end of last season, we tilled the land in Fredericksburg to prepare the ground for winter. What was once a

growing maze of greenery is now a plot of dirt. And while the wolf urine—which I now know is more commonly referred to as deer repellent—was not effective, we learned that a combination of motion-sensor lights and pie pans tied to stakes kept the deer away from our melons. Next summer, we'll be out in the Virginia heat for hours each day. Covered in dirt, Fitz will hand-water each plant. Once again, we'll turn seeds into sweetness. 🍉

Debra Freeman is the managing editor of Southern Grit Magazine . She has written about the intersection of food and race for Plate Magazine , Gastro Obscura , Broadway Black , and Pit Magazine .